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ABSTRACT

The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), a national resource for policy and practice development in post-16 education and training, responds to a government White Paper on higher education's (HE's) future. LSDA believes that policy development across further education (FE) and HE sectors should be coordinated and that the government has not articulated a clear vision of FE colleges' role in HE delivery to provide a basis for development of their capacity; welcomes emphasis on establishing clear, distinctive missions for education providers across sectors and recognition that FE colleges will have a key role in delivering expansion in foundation degrees; supports proposals to strengthen foundation degrees by establishing them as the standard two-year HE qualification; recommends consideration of the most effective means of developing FE capacity; supports government commitment to fair access; welcomes review of ACCESS courses to modernize their criteria to make them more flexible and attractive to adult learners; is disappointed that the contribution research can play in FE college development and delivery of HE is not mentioned; welcomes creation of a "teaching quality academy" to support continuous professional development in HE; welcomes the commitment to developing improved ways to describe, measure, and record student achievement; supports knowledge transfer; and agrees government funding will continue as the major HE funding source, but believes additional sources are needed. (Contains 13 endnotes.) (YLB)

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ED 480 389

LSDA responds

The future of higher education

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This paper sets out LSDA's response to the Department for Education and Skills White Paper, *The future of higher education*, published in January 2003. The consultation document is on the internet at: www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestrategy

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Introduction

1 The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) is a strategic national resource for the development of policy and practice in post-16 education and training. Our activities include research, with partners, to inform the development of policy and practice for post-16 education and training. We have a clear brief to work across the post-16 sector in England and Wales, providing support for colleges, work-based training, adult and community learning, and schools post-16, with a particular focus on quality. We work with FE colleges that deliver higher education and HE providers that deliver FE provision.

2 We welcome the opportunity to respond to the government's proposals for the future of higher education. We agree that higher education makes an important contribution to national economic and social well-being, and support the aim to widen access. High-quality, credible and flexible HE opportunities should be available to all who have the potential to benefit.

3 The significance of the White Paper for the learning and skills sector is twofold. First, the sector is essential to achieving the government's aim to increase participation and change the socio-economic profile of those qualified to enter higher education. It offers flexible and comprehensive pathways, including work-based and customised pathways for the full age range of learners. Second, FE colleges are significant providers of higher education in their own right and will have a particular role in delivering the planned expansion of foundation degrees.

4 The following comments on the White Paper draw on a range of research evidence from our work and address those aspects of the proposals particularly relevant to our remit and expertise.

Coordination of FE and HE policy and practice

5 We welcome the proposal to look at the boundaries between further[1] and higher education, to address the barriers to collaboration and to reduce the bureaucracy associated with two different funding and quality regimes. Our research published in *Closer by degrees*[2] drew attention to the problems encountered by FE colleges in this area and the lack of coherent policy development and strategic planning across the FE–HE boundary.

6 We believe that policy development across the sectors will need to be carried out in closer partnership to avoid discontinuities and unnecessary bureaucracy, and to support the collaboration and coordination required to achieve the expansion proposed in the White Paper. In addition, there will need to be strong links between all the various bodies responsible for supporting the HE and learning and skills sector workforce, including the Leadership College, the proposed Leadership Foundation and Teaching Quality Academy, the DfES Standards Unit, and the emerging post-16 Sector Skills Council.

7 LSDA is lead partner in the new Leadership College, which is charged to support the development of management and leadership in further and higher education. In particular, effective communication must be built between the Leadership Foundation and the Leadership College. An effective partnership between these two organisations would be of mutual benefit in creating an ethos in the HE sector, whereby the practice of leadership and management is accorded similar status to that of research.

A strategic role for the learning and skills sector

8 We have argued in previous consultation responses that government needs to articulate a clear vision of the role of FE colleges in the delivery of higher education to provide a basis for strategic development of their capacity. We do not believe that this has been achieved in this White Paper, which lacks mechanisms for determining the contribution of further education and for investing in developing its capacity to deliver this contribution.

9 This reflects the lack of a clear planning mechanism to bring together the role of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in developing the provider infrastructure for the learning and skills sector and the role of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in funding HE provision. We believe that further consideration needs to be given to mechanisms to enable a more strategic approach to planning the contribution of further education to the vision set out in the White Paper.

Diversity of mission

10 We welcome the emphasis being placed on establishing clear and distinctive missions for education providers across the schools, FE and HE sectors. LSDA has carried out work on mission review in the learning and skills sector to support the implementation of Strategic Area Review (StAR),[3] which examines benefits and processes. We therefore agree with the proposal in the White Paper that universities should openly identify and play to their strengths. The process of defining an institutional mission is a valuable one, and when carried out effectively can:

- give a clear sense of purpose and direction to an institution
- facilitate decision-making
- assist in marketing
- aid effective evaluation.

11 However, clarity of mission alone will not ensure an optimum distribution of provision. In the learning and skills sector, in addition to encouraging clarity of mission, StAR, as a clear planning mechanism, ensures that provision is comprehensive and appropriately distributed across the network of providers. This should avoid gaps, unnecessary duplication and competition between providers.

12 As indicated above, a stronger coordinating mechanism for HE delivery across further and higher education is required to secure a coherent distribution of provision and systematically develop the capacity to deliver expansion. It needs to take account of the role of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in relation to regional skills strategies and will be particularly important when it concerns the development of foundation degrees that can support the local and regional economy.

Foundation degrees – validation and funding

13 We welcome the recognition in the White Paper that FE colleges will have a key role in delivering the expansion in foundation degrees. To carry out this role, colleges need the certainty of a sustained role and long-term horizon so that they can manage the investment in staff skills and other resources. We are not convinced that the proposals are adequate to secure the stability required to develop the capacity of further education effectively.

14 We strongly support the proposal for Foundation Degree Forward – a new network of universities with validating powers for foundation degrees offered in further education and other colleges without degree-awarding powers. If colleges are to play a key role in delivering these qualifications, it is important that they have the ability to seek validation for an award independently of their local HE provider, if necessary. We also agree that Foundation Degree Forward could have an important role as a 'reservoir of good practice', spreading successful development and innovation in design and delivery, and helping to give national currency to the foundation degree award.

15 However, we are concerned that the funding model places colleges in the position of franchisee rather than strategic partner in the delivery of foundation degrees. FE colleges deliver a wealth of higher-level programmes beyond foundation degrees, and should be recognised as important HE providers in their own right.

16 The independence afforded by the introduction of Foundation Degree Forward is not reflected in the funding model. As currently framed, with one hand the proposals would grant independence to colleges to develop foundation degree awards but would take it away with the other as they are forced into a franchised funding arrangement with an HE institution. We believe that to develop a strategic role for colleges, the system should move towards more direct funding for FE colleges where they have recognised capacity and expertise in delivering HE courses. While we welcome the review of current funding levels to be carried out by HEFCE (there is a huge variation in the level of funding transferred from HE institutions to FE colleges to deliver franchised HE programmes), we do not see this as a long-term solution.

17 We also recommend that, in the longer term, consideration be given to assigning foundation degree-awarding powers to FE colleges. If colleges are to deliver the increase in HE provision envisaged, their position needs to be strengthened so that they can enter into genuine partnerships with HE institutions. There are concerns within the FE sector about the measure of control that HE institutions may have over the expansion.

Foundation degrees – a strong vocational brand

18 We very much support the proposals to strengthen foundation degrees by establishing them as the standard 2-year HE qualification; enhancing their status, making them the main focus of HE expansion, offering financial incentives for their development in new sectors and encouraging student take-up. In particular, we welcome the presentation in the White Paper of foundation degrees as awards in their own right, with capacity for progression to honours degrees a secondary design consideration. This should help to establish the integrity and status of the award and promote its development even where there is no obvious progression route to an honours degree.

19 Foundation degrees have the potential to improve significantly the status of the vocational routes as valid, credible and worthwhile options. Building on the new vocational and work-related curriculum options in the 14–19 phase, and the development of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in the learning and skills sector, there is a basis for establishing strong and coherent vocational routes that offer attractive and credible options for learners.

20 The principle of having a single national brand of work-focused, higher-level qualifications is very important. We support the proposal that HNCs and HNDs should be brought within the brand. However, the process of doing so will need to be handled carefully so that they retain their existing credibility and enhance it through association with a national brand. The distinct design features of foundation degrees – a substantial work-based element and close alignment with employer needs – should also enhance the value of HNCs and HNDs. We feel very strongly that these design features should not be lost.

21 Our research for HEFCE last year suggested that HNCs and HNDs were particularly popular in occupational sectors such as catering, engineering, art and design, which were therefore unlikely to develop foundation degrees.[4] This suggests a need for incentives to encourage these areas to embrace the foundation degree model, as envisaged, and a need for a clear demonstration of the added value of the foundation degree brand.

22 As new foundation degrees are developed, they must continue to be relevant to the skills needed by employers. It will therefore be crucial that the Sector Skills Councils are closely engaged in this process, given their longer-term view of the continuing professional development needs of their sector. We are currently managing commissioned research to establish the value that employers place on sub-degree vocational qualifications and the skills they need from their employees.[5] We hope that this could also help to inform the further development of these qualifications.

23 The foundation degree prospectus (HEFCE)[6] envisaged that a high proportion of entrants would be people in the workplace developing their skills through part-time or distance learning provision, as well as some young people taking this as a route to employment. We are aware of concerns that there has been a shift in emphasis towards the latter category. We consider it crucial that foundation degrees meet the needs of both groups, and particularly encourage more mature learners in work to develop their skills.

Capacity building

24 We recommend that serious consideration be given to the most effective means of developing the capacity of further education to make a clear contribution to the vision in the White Paper. As highlighted earlier, to offer high-quality higher education, colleges need to have the certainty of a sustained role and long-term horizon to manage the investment in staff skills and other resources. This needs to draw on research into current capacity and performance.

25 For example, it may be appropriate to consider whether there is a need to establish minimum student numbers for HE delivery, based on an assessment of the critical mass required to offer cost-effective, high-quality provision. However, in some cases it will be appropriate to support niche HE provision in FE colleges where this forms the end of a progression route in a subject with substantial provision at other levels (particularly Level 3) in the college, or where the subject specifically meets the needs of an important local industry. This may be particularly relevant where there is a Centre of Vocational Excellence in a college.

26 The rapid expansion of foundation degree provision has significant human resource implications for the professional development of staff. FE colleges seeking to expand their HE offer will need to develop their capacity with care to maintain and enhance quality and standards. The recruitment, retention and development of college staff to deliver higher education will be a challenge for a sector suffering teaching skills shortages and skills gaps in key curriculum areas.

27 It is assumed that much of the growth in HE provision will be concentrated in colleges with established HE partnerships. Research into the capacity of these partnerships to deliver more higher education to meet the government's participation target by 2010 should be undertaken as a matter of urgency. Such research should ideally be conducted on a regional basis to take account of the regional pattern of provision and skills needs. It should consider:

- how colleges' HE staff and the quality and standards of provision currently compare with HE institutions in the same subject areas
- the adequacy of colleges' human resource strategies to secure high standards for expanded HE provision in the future.

28 This research could provide an assessment of the support needed to develop staffing capacity and recommend effective and efficient mechanisms for delivering a programme of support.

29 It would be helpful if the current HEFCE evaluation of foundation degrees considered human resource issues directly, within its remit to evaluate teaching and learning practices and the institutional impact of foundation degree delivery. It would also be helpful if the DfES research project, 'Recruitment and retention of academic staff in higher education' (March 2003 to November 2004),[7] considered the implications for FE staffing directly when investigating the staff skills needed to achieve the target of HE participation by 50% of young people by 2010.

Fair access

30 We very much support the government's commitment to fair access and the recognition of the impact of differential achievement in schools and colleges on participation at higher levels. We agree that the 'Success for all' reform programme, by improving the quality of learning – particularly vocational learning – on offer in the learning and skills sector should, in time, make an important contribution to widening participation at all levels.

31 The new 'Aimhigher' programme appears to focus particularly on schools and colleges as the progression route to higher education delivered in HE institutions. To maximise impact, the programme must take account of the role of FE colleges as important providers of higher education in their own right and promote the option of progression to such provision. Our research on non-prescribed higher education[8] provides compelling evidence of the volume of HE delivery by FE colleges. This is not reflected in the significance accorded to FE colleges in the development of higher education.

32 We would like to see greater emphasis placed on the vocational entry routes to higher education for 18 year olds, such as Modern Apprenticeships and BTEC National Diplomas. It is important that this route is given value and credibility if the government is to achieve its wider aim of achieving parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes in the 14–19 phase. To make a significant impact on widening participation it is essential to train teachers in schools, admissions tutors and advisers to understand the full range of courses that prospective students can take.

33 Widening participation in higher education raises particular issues about the levels of support required to retain non-traditional learners. It is currently unclear whether taking students who may need significant additional support during their HE studies may have a destabilising effect on the system. The HE system as a whole does not consistently provide the level of support required and this may lead to lower retention rates. This highlights a potential need for specific support and professional development among HE staff to help them to adjust to the needs of a more varied student body.

34 The HE system could draw lessons from FE colleges, which have a long history of effective work with non-traditional learners. FE colleges have a number of mechanisms through which to provide considerable additional support for such students, although the link between this support and retention rates is difficult to establish. We are at the early stages of carrying out research to explore the type of HE experience students gain on HE programmes delivered in FE colleges. The research will take into account the differences between HE institutions and FE colleges on a range of indicators, such as environment, teaching and learning, support and progression. It should help to identify effective support mechanisms for students undertaking HE courses in the FE sector, which may have wider applicability.

35 We support the proposal for an Access Regulator[9] as a mechanism for improving equality of opportunity in HE access, provided that the bureaucratic burdens it imposes are minimal. It is important to balance the work of the Access Regulator with action earlier in the education system to ensure wider access. In addition, this regulatory reform will need to be supported by strong mechanisms to promote good practice. HE providers will need assistance in adopting and embedding new practices.

36 To achieve the growth required it is essential to look at better ways of supporting part-time students and those in employment. We support the White Paper's proposals for financial support for part-time learners, offering a clear national entitlement to the poorest learners on substantial programmes and increased flexibility with Access Funds for the rest, although we would like to see even greater flexibility in this regard. We consider that if someone is only studying for a few hours per week, their maintenance ought to come through work or the benefits system. However, we suggest that the White Paper could offer more in terms of promoting part-time routes to institutions.

Access courses

37 We welcome the proposed review of Access courses to modernise their criteria so that they are more flexible and attractive to adult learners. Our research in this area[10] has shown that there needs to be development of the Access curriculum and a national strategy for Access to strengthen the national credibility of these locally developed courses and enhance their contribution to widening participation. The research concluded that a new approach is needed to encourage more non-traditional learners to remain in or return to education.

38 The research also found that mature students are more likely to say they are deterred by the costs of higher education and the prospect of debt. The lack of mandatory support for mature students studying in further education remains a barrier to growth in these programmes.

39 We also suggest that consideration be given to developing Access courses tailored to provide progression directly to foundation degrees.

Research excellence

40 While we recognise that the thrust of the proposals in this section is about the benefits of concentrating research excellence, we are disappointed that there is no mention of the contribution research can and does play in FE colleges' development and delivery of higher education. Explicit in other parts of the document is the assumption that FE colleges will collaborate with HE institutions to expand higher education. Collaboration in colleges' research activities – or the support of HE institutions for colleges' research activities – is an essential element of HE expansion. Colleges are often close to their local employers and would be well placed to undertake relevant research with and for the employer community as a means of informing the development of higher-level vocational qualifications.

41 We would suggest that the range and type of research understood and recognised as such should be widened and that greater levels of collaboration between institutions in relation to research should be fostered, especially between FE and HE institutions. Moreover, we believe that recognition of the role of FE colleges in supporting research and innovation in the local economy should provide the basis for greater collaboration and partnership in support of local and regional economic development.

Teaching excellence

42 We welcome the creation of a 'teaching quality academy' to support continuous professional development in higher education. We recommend that access to this support be made available to those delivering higher education in FE colleges. Clear boundaries and roles will need to be identified for the various bodies now supporting professional development and standards, including the new Standards Unit in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the post-16 Leadership College and the emerging Sector Skills Council for post-16 learning.

43 We note the proposal to create centres of teaching excellence to reward staff and fund the promotion and spread of good pedagogical practice among all HE providers. We welcome this emphasis on developing good teaching practice. However, we would caution that dissemination of good practice in itself does not necessarily improve practice and a more systematic approach is required. Providers need help in transferring and adapting practice so that it can be embedded effectively in their specific context. In addition, evidence from our quality improvement programmes indicates that providers often need support in change processes.

44 We suggest that an evaluation of the beacon college initiative in the FE sector would be of value, before this type of model is transferred more widely among HE providers. As mentioned above, anecdotal evidence suggests that excellent providers are not necessarily expert in sharing good practice.

45 We welcome the proposal that mixed economy FE colleges should be eligible to be recognised as centres of teaching excellence. If there is to be the expansion in higher education delivered in FE colleges that the paper implies it will be important that FE colleges and their staff involved in HE delivery have equal access to the range of opportunities and support available.

Measuring student achievement

46 We welcome the commitment to developing more robust ways of describing, measuring and recording student achievement. In undertaking this task, we would emphasise the importance of incorporating the range of vocational, sub-degree, non-prescribed HE programmes, funded through the LSC. Our recent research into non-prescribed higher education[11] highlighted the need for a common means of recording achievement, classifying higher-level qualifications and deciding what is meant by 'higher education'.

47 We also support the proposal to develop more sophisticated ways of measuring 'value-added' – or the distance travelled by learners. However, evidence from research in further education shows that this is not easy. The only successful models have been in GCSE to A-level progression; vocational qualifications lend themselves less readily to measuring value-added systematically and in a statistically reliable form. Our research on value-added in GNVQs[12] demonstrated how difficult it is to put a value-added measure on these types of qualifications. Given that the expansion in HE learner numbers is likely to be focused on learners with non-traditional qualifications (ie not A-level), the measure of value added will need to be much more sophisticated.

Knowledge transfer

48 We support the emphasis in the White Paper on developing closer connections between business and higher education, and the need for effective mechanisms for applying academic knowledge and research to business and industry.

49 Our recent research into the incidence and nature of research-related services provided by FE colleges for employers[13] found many examples of interesting work, including research, advice and consultancy, audits and evaluations and support for product development and business incubation. However, this work is often driven by the enthusiasm and expertise of individual staff and is therefore marginal to the general work of the college. In a few cases colleges are members of regional consortia with HE institutions and other colleges which allow firms to make use of specialist knowledge or facilities available elsewhere, with the local college acting as broker.

50 The research suggested a link between business-related research and development, productivity and skills development and argued the need for a shift in the perception of colleges' purpose to encompass support for innovation and productivity. It found that there is a need for applied research and development, especially for small and medium-sized companies, which is not and could not be filled by the research provided by most universities.

51 We suggest that this research could be a valuable starting point for further consideration of the knowledge transfer function of 'less research-intensive' institutions and colleges. The Knowledge Exploitation Fund in Wales is an interesting precedent, available to both colleges and universities to provide support for companies. The CoVE programme in England could also provide a useful context for development of research-related services for business by colleges.

52 We recommend that relationships should be developed, where appropriate, between the proposed 'Knowledge Exchanges' – which are intended to be exemplars of good practice in interactions between 'less research-intensive institutions' and business – and the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in the learning and skills sector. The implication of the White Paper is that FE colleges may form part of the consortia identified as 'Knowledge Exchanges'. This relationship is likely to be particularly relevant to colleges and other training providers in the CoVE programme (and the 'extension programme').

Freedoms and funding

53 We agree that while government funding will continue to be the major source of funds for the HE sector, the scale of investment needed will require additional sources of finance. We also agree that universities should be supported to develop endowment funds, and that individuals, as major beneficiaries of higher education, should be asked to contribute more. We do, however, have some concerns about the detail of the mechanisms proposed.

54 Increased income from endowments would have several advantages. It would deliver extra resources and increase the independence of HE institutions from any single funder. It would also help build links between the HE sector and the wider community, through firms and individuals. Endowments will, however, take time to become a significant factor and are likely to be a more important source of income in some institutions than others.

55 The most prestigious institutions are the most likely to attract high endowments for two reasons: their graduates are usually the most wealthy citizens and most firms will want to be associated with the most successful universities. Those undertaking their studies in FE colleges are among the least likely to benefit from individual or corporate endowment. For this reason we would urge the government to give greater thought to how it can support the development of endowment funds across the range of institutions. Match funding is unlikely to be a useful approach.

56 The White Paper does not mention a potential source of funding that has been very important in the past in the UK and still plays a substantial role overseas. Civic investment through local and regional councils is a major force supporting higher education elsewhere in Europe and in North America. Moreover, elected local authorities were responsible for developing the polytechnics, now the 'new university' sector in the UK. Further consideration of how local authorities might play a role in the future development of higher education could be of value.

57 We agree that since graduates, in general, benefit financially and in other ways from their studies, they should make a significant contribution to the cost. The current level of fees for HE study (25%) is no greater than that paid by adult learners studying at Level 2 or Level 3 in further education, where the financial returns are significantly less. We believe the broad principle, that the contribution expected should be proportionate to the returns generated, should be applied consistently across all adult learning. This would suggest that an increase of fees to the £3000 maximum quoted, or 75% of the average cost, is not unreasonable.

58 We are also aware from our own research that the impact of costs on participation in learning is often exaggerated. In the UK there has been no significant reduction in participation that can be linked to the introduction of tuition fees in higher education; and the experience of other countries similarly shows no fall in demand. We would not expect any reduction in demand to follow a general increase in fees, provided that the safeguards set out in the White Paper are maintained.

59 The principal safeguards, which we agree are necessary, are to make available loan finance to cover both fees and maintenance, and to make repayment conditional on reaching an income threshold. In theory, this should mean finance is not a barrier to access for anyone. In practice, however, some individuals, particularly from the lowest social groups, are not convinced that HE can deliver higher returns for them. They are not so much debt averse as doubtful of the evidence of the value of higher education. The government ought perhaps to consider focusing its scheme of grant support not only on those who have low incomes, but also on those with no family history of HE participation.

60 We welcome the increased package of support for part-time learners, believing that a major expansion of the part-time route can be a powerful vehicle for widening participation. An entitlement to a package of support with fees, books, equipment and childcare, for substantial part-time learners on low incomes, is a helpful step forward. We also support the proposal that the Access to Learning Fund might be used to help those studying over 10% of a full-time course. However, we see no justification for centrally imposed restrictions on institutions' discretion in this area.

Notes

[1] The term 'further education' is used to refer to the learning and skills sector, ie post-16 provision, other than that funded by the Higher Education Funding Council – that is, provision funded by the Learning and Skills Council.

[2] *Closer by degrees: the past, present and future of higher education in further education colleges*. Parry G and Thompson A (LSDA 2002).

[3] *Provider missions and their development: a report by the LSDA for the DfES*. Edem A, Spencer P and Fyfield B (LSDA 2003).

[4] *Progression from HNC/Ds to honours degrees: diversity, complexity and change*. LSDA in association with the University of Sheffield School of Education funded by HEFCE; published on HEFCE website October 2002. At www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/RDreports/Downloads/report11.htm

[5] 'The role of vocational higher education in meeting the present and future needs of the economy' – research in progress being carried out by the Open University Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), funded through LSC, DfES, the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) and HEFCE. Due to report July 2003.

[6] *Foundation degree prospectus*, HEFCE circular 00/27, July 2000. At www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2000/00_27.pdf

[7] This is research in progress. For more information see www.dfes.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectId=13765&type=3&resultspage=21

[8] *Non-prescribed higher education: where does it fit?* Clark J (LSDA research report 2002).

[9] The proposal has since developed and this has become the Office for Fair Access.

[10] *Access provision in further education colleges*. Bromley R. At www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/Accprofecol.pdf July 2002

[11] *Non-prescribed higher education: where does it fit?* Clark J (LSDA research report 2002).

[12] *Value added in vocational qualifications.* Martinez P and Rudden T (LSDA research report 2001).

[13] *Further supporting business: research-related support for company innovation and development.* Hughes M and Stanton G (LSDA conference publication, June 2003).

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